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ABSTRACT

The marketing tools and techniques of the main campus of Ohio University, Athens, were used to carry out an admission marketing research project to aid its five two-year regional campuses. A survey instrument was sent to 897 admitted applicants for fall 1988 in mid-August, with a followup in early September. Response rate was 41%. The survey attempted to measure differences in student perceptions concerning the primary competitors of the five regional campuses. Results are presented for responses rated as very positive for: location and setting, financial aid, distance of the campus from home, extracurricular activities, varsity athletic program, campus size, academic reputation, cost, relative or alumni who attended, academic program/major, admissions correspondence, campus visit, talk with admissions representative, talk with faculty, high school counselor, high school teacher, friends' opinion, and media reports. Results included the following: (1) 68% of those attending and those not attending rated location and setting as very positive; (2) cost had a 54% very positive rating among attenders; and (3) 37% of those attending rated academic program/major as very positive. Contains 5 references. (KM)

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Marketing Research at Regional Campuses

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Paper presented at the 29th Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research, Baltimore, Maryland, April 30-May 3, 1989.

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This paper was presented at the Twenty-Ninth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Omni Inner Harbor Hotel and the Lord Baltimore Hotel, Baltimore, Maryland, April 30 - May 3, 1989. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Teresa Karolewski
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Forum Publications Editorial
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Abstract

There are five regional campuses at this university, with a total enrollment of 7500 students. Having a different mission from the main campus, they needed to start their own marketing procedures to accomplish their own goals. Since the main campus had already developed marketing tools and techniques, it was fairly easy to transfer many of the tools and techniques to the other campuses serving this region of the state. This paper describes an admission marketing research project carried out to aid the two-year regional campuses.

Marketing Research at Regional Campuses

Background

For some time the regional campuses at Ohio University have been interested in refining their freshman marketing strategies in the competitive two-year field in southeastern Ohio. With a total enrollment of 7500 students at five branch campuses located as far to the northeast as the Belmont County campus near Wheeling to as far to the southwest as the Ironton campus near Huntington, West Virginia, some face competition from both instate and out-of-state institutions. The campuses at Chillicothe, Lancaster, and Zanesville compete with technical colleges, other branch campuses, and even four-year institutions on the periphery of the central Ohio area. In order to position themselves at the forefront of the competitive two-year field in this region, they developed several instruments for gathering data from applicants as well as individuals within the community.

There have been numerous studies attempting to explain the reasons students select certain colleges. Certainly the literature has pointed out that the image of an institution in combination with students' goals and values all combine to orient them toward a school with the training and skills they seek (Broker and Noble, 1985; Caren and Kemerer, 1979; Ihlanfeldt, 1980; Kotler, 1976; Trachtenberg, 1985).

Study Design

The study was designed using the resources of the staff of the Office of Institutional Research at Ohio University. Since the main campus in Athens had already developed marketing tools for its own research, it was fairly easy to transfer many of its tools and techniques to the regional campuses.

Staff from the Office of Institutional Research met with staff from the regional campuses to modify the research instrument that had been used at the Athens campus since 1979. After those modifications were made the instrument was sent out to all new freshman applicants for fall 1988 in mid-August with a followup in early September. This was done just before they were to enroll, since the study wished to collect perceptions before the students arrived on campus. Of the 897 admitted applicants who received the survey, 365 or 41 percent returned it. The Zanesville campus had the highest return rate of 46 percent (106 returned out of 227 sent out) while the Ironton campus had the lowest (26 returned out of 87). The Chillicothe campus had a return rate of 42 percent (68 returned out of 160), Belmont 40 percent (65 returned out of 162), and Lancaster 38 percent (100 returned out of 261). The instrument attempted to measure differences in perceptions among students of the primary competitors of the five regional campus by sending out a

questionnaire to the total population that had applied for admission at each campus.

Using the ACT Market Analysis and Yield Analysis services, we were able to determine the strongest competitors at each institution and the types of students most likely to be interested in our programs. From this information we were able to design a scale for each campus that identified its main institutional competitors; we also measured perceptual differences, using multidimensional scaling. The results were tabulated and separate reports for each campus were prepared that answered the following questions:

1. What factors influenced the student's decision to apply and attend a particular regional campus?
2. How are recruiting programs and activities evaluated by students who are admitted to the regional campuses?
3. Are there differences between those who attend and those who do not in their perceptions of individual campus programs?
4. Of the freshman students admitted to the regional campus, what are their perceptions of the regional campus and their major competitors?

Concerning ourselves primarily with the student questionnaire, we were able to produce generalized results for

the regional campuses as a whole as well as important differences among them individually.

Findings from the Application Process

Students were asked to rate how each of 19 factors influenced their decision to apply to an Ohio University regional campus. Questions were scaled from one (very positive) to five (very negative). The factors chosen for consideration were LOCATION AND SETTING, FINANCIAL AID, DISTANCE OF THE CAMPUS FROM MY HOME, EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES, VARSITY ATHLETIC PROGRAM, SIZE OF THE CAMPUS, ACADEMIC REPUTATION, COST, RELATIVE OR ALUMNI WHO ATTENDED, ACADEMIC PROGRAM OR SPECIFIC MAJOR, ADMISSIONS CORRESPONDENCE, CAMPUS VISIT, TALK WITH ADMISSIONS REPRESENTATIVE, TALK WITH FACULTY MEMBER, YOUR HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELOR, HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER, FRIENDS' OPINION OF CAMPUS, and NEWSPAPER, RADIO, & TV REPORTS.

Results reported in this paper will represent only those responses that were rated as one (very positive). As expected, geography played an important part in the minds of many students in applying to a regional campus (~~see table 1~~). Sixty-eight percent of those attending and the same percentages of those not attending indicated that the location and setting factor was very positive in applying to a regional campus of Ohio University, confirming a belief that our campuses are attractive in appearance. The location factor was reinforced by distance from

home, since 65 percent of the attenders and 61 percent of the nonattenders listed it as very positive. In addition, cost had a 54 percent very positive rating among attenders, indicating that it along with distance and location were the primary factors influencing a student to apply.

There were other factors, however, that persuaded students to apply, chief among them being academic programs or majors: 37 percent of those planning to attend had a very positive opinion of this consideration. Also important among the attenders were parents' perceptions of the campus: 36 percent rated it as very positive, slightly above financial aid (34 percent) and other factors, such as academic reputation (28 percent), the size of the institution (27 percent), and relatives' or alumni opinions (22 percent).

What sort of an impression did the admissions staff and campus visitation programs make on our attenders? The results were mixed in the area that should be of critical importance to admission's yield. Just under 25 percent of enrolled students rated talking with an admissions representative as very positive, about the same as they rated talking with a faculty member. The campus visit received a 26 percent very positive rating, while the correspondence from the admissions offices received a 22 percent very positive rating, indicating that additional work

needed to be accomplished in the important area of establishing as much personal contact as possible with the student.

What did not particularly influence a student to apply?: media reports (4 percent), varsity athletics (5 percent), and extracurricular activities (5 percent). Likewise, other factors such as the high school teacher (12 percent), high school counselor (13 percent), and opinions of friends (17 percent) had no significant impact on the student's application decision.

Application Differences Among the Campuses

The Lancaster campus, the largest of the branch campuses, had the highest rating in the distance from home category (74 percent very positive) of the five regional campuses, followed by Chillicothe (65 percent), Zanesville (64 percent), Belmont (59 percent), and Ironton (58 percent). These ratings perhaps reflected Lancaster's being closer to a metropolitan area, while Belmont and Ironton are more remote from the state's population centers. The location and setting of individual campuses showed practically the same results, with Lancaster at the top receiving a 74 percent very positive rating and Belmont at the bottom with 56 percent.

The differences that financial aid had on applying showed striking variation, with attenders from Ironton giving it a 55 percent very positive rating, significantly ahead of second place Lancaster with 41 percent. Belmont and Chillicothe had similar

ratings of 37 and 36 percent, while Zanesville received only a 16 percent very positive rating. Perhaps the importance of financial aid at Ironton explains parents' being such a significant factor, since attenders from that campus gave that consideration a 73 percent very positive rating in applying, significantly ahead of Lancaster attenders, who indicated parental influence a very positive factor at the 42 percent level, Zanesville at 38 percent, Chillicothe at 28 percent, and finally Belmont at 27 percent. Likewise, the influence of relatives or alumni was highest at Ironton, with a 35 percent very positive rating and Belmont lowest with 15 percent. Lancaster led the middle ground with 27 percent, followed by Zanesville at 20 and Chillicothe at 17. In the same vein, cost was rated very positively by 61 percent of the attenders at Belmont, 58 percent at Ironton, 56 percent at Chillicothe, 53 percent at Lancaster, and 46 percent at Zanesville.

The size factor at the various campuses also showed differences in influencing attenders to apply. Those at Lancaster deemed it 41 percent very positive while those at Ironton only 11 percent, with the other campuses in the middle. Academic reputation, however, did not show such a spread, ranging from a 35 percent very positive rating at Lancaster to 22 percent at Chillicothe. In contrast, academic programs received a very

positive rating among attenders of 48 percent at Zanesville, whereas the other campuses all received a 32 percent rating.

In terms of marketing, Lancaster seemed to be a leader, with 28 percent of the attenders giving a very positive rating to the influence that admissions correspondence had on their decision to apply. Not far behind were Belmont and Zanesville with 23 percent, Ironton with 18 percent, and finally Chillicothe with 11 percent. The campus visit was also perceived more favorably by attenders at Lancaster, with 41 percent viewing it in a very positive light. Since the rankings for campus visit followed the same pattern as the admissions correspondence, with Zanesville showing a 24 percent very positive response, Belmont 23 percent, Ironton 18 percent, and Chillicothe 15 percent, the recruiting process at some campuses seems more effective than at others. Bearing this out is the 42 percent very positive rating that attenders gave Lancaster in the category of talking to an admissions representative. Again Chillicothe scored lowest with 8 percent, while Ironton received 33 percent, Zanesville 20 percent, and Belmont 18 percent. Talking with a faculty member also yielded similar results, with Lancaster at 42 percent and the other campuses trailing behind.

What about the influence of a high school counselor in affecting a student's decision to apply? The attenders at Ironton indicated a 22 percent positive rating, perhaps a

reflection that the Ironton campus used to share facilities in the local high school. Zanesville had an 18 percent rating, Lancaster 16 percent, Chillicothe 9 percent, and Belmont 6 percent. These figures are in contrast to the influence of a high school teacher's opinion of applying. In that category, Lancaster clearly led with 22 percent, nine percentage points ahead of Ironton, which was followed closely by Chillicothe at 12 percent, Zanesville at 10 percent, and Belmont at 2 percent. Research findings of significant differences in very positive factors for applying were quite apparent in this study. Some of these differences could be linked to the geographic location of a particular branch campus but a number of the differences were associated with perceptions of the quality of the factors at each campus. Some of the campuses, notably Lancaster, were seen as doing an excellent job of recruiting the applicants. Students perceived their campus visits as positive, and staff and faculty were rated favorably for their part in the student's decision to apply at Lancaster.

The Enrollment Decision

After rating factors that influenced them to apply, the applicants were asked if they would be attending a regional campus of Ohio University in the fall. We asked those who responded positively to rank the three most important reasons for attending. These forced-order rankings enabled us to get a

better view of our strengths. Again, distance from home clearly was uppermost in a student's decision to attend, being ranked first by 25 percent of the attenders. Location and cost tied for second with each having 18 percent, and academic programs next at 16 percent.

Within campuses there were some differences as to the most important factor rated in the enrollment decision. The first-ranked factors were distance from home for Chillicothe (32 percent), Lancaster (tied at 20 percent with cost), and Zanesville (29 percent). Following closely behind distance from home at Zanesville was academic program (28 percent). Although students at Belmont ranked cost first at 33 percent, distance from home (23 percent), location (14 percent), and academic programs (11 percent) were also prominent. At Ironton, whose students ranked financial aid first at 24 percent, three different factors were tied for second at 14 percent: location, distance from home, and cost.

While distance from home appeared to be the most important reason for the enrollment decision among most of our campuses, there were several significant variations that made each campus unique. These differences point to the conclusion that each campus must be viewed separately when reviewing the data and recommending campus policy and programs.

The Recruitment Program

Students were asked to evaluate nine recruiting activities carried out at the regional campuses and then to rank them in importance. The responses were scaled from very satisfactory to very unsatisfactory on a five-point scale. The very-satisfactory ratings were analyzed in an effort to improve the recruitment process. These nine recruiting actives were VISIT BY O.U. ADMISSIONS COUNSELOR TO MY HIGH SCHOOL, INDIVIDUAL CAMPUS VISIT, MEETING WITH ADMISSIONS COUNSELOR DURING A CAMPUS VISIT, MEETING WITH A FACULTY MEMBER, TOUR OF THE CAMPUS, TALK WITH AN O.U. ADMISSIONS COUNSELOR AT COLLEGE FAIR, PUBLICATIONS OR LETTERS FROM CAMPUS, MEETING WITH FINANCIAL AID STAFF MEMBER, and NEWSPAPER/RADIO OR TV AD.

The highest ratings were given to meeting a faculty member and the publications or letters sent out, each with a 45 percent very satisfactory score among attenders ~~(see table 2)~~. The individual campus visit had a rating of 41 percent among all the campuses, followed by the visit of an Ohio University counselor to the high school, where 39 percent of the applicants found it very satisfactory. Talking to an admissions counselor at a college day or fair function received 38 percent, about the same as meeting with the counselor during a campus visit or taking the campus tour (both 37 percent). Meeting with a financial aid staff member was very satisfactory for 34 percent of the

attenders, while the mass media ads (newspaper, radio, or TV) were the least successful at 11 percent.

Among the individual campuses, meeting a faculty member remained consistently popular, with the Lancaster campus the highest at 49 percent and Zanesville the lowest at 38 percent. The same with letters and publications sent out by the regional campuses: Ironton was highest with 55 percent and Chillicothe lowest at 40 percent. The individual campus visit showed Lancaster the highest at 60 percent, well ahead of Ironton at 39 percent, perhaps reflecting the fact that Lancaster is the largest of the regional campuses at Ohio University with its three buildings and consequent greater diversity. The range of scores was small; Chillicothe had the lowest very-satisfactory rating of 30 percent.

The visit by the campus admission counselor to the high school was generally very satisfactory, with Lancaster again having the high score (53 percent) among attenders, well ahead of Chillicothe with 39 percent, Ironton and Belmont both with 36 percent, and Zanesville with 30 percent. Likewise talking to an admissions counselor at a college day or college fair function showed the Lancaster campus garnering the highest ratings with a 47 percent very satisfactory response rate, followed by Belmont with 39 percent, Ironton with 33 percent, Zanesville with 32 percent, and Chillicothe with 30 percent. The range was slightly

greater in terms of meeting a counselor during a campus visit. Although Lancaster received a 49 percent very positive rating from attenders, Ironton was close with 46 percent, with the Chillicothe campus next at 40 percent, Zanesville at 30 percent, and Belmont at 26 percent. The campus tour clearly showed Lancaster's resources were productive, since 51 percent of the attenders strongly approved of it, well ahead of Chillicothe at 38 percent, Belmont at 34 percent, Ironton at 25 percent, and Zanesville at 24 percent.

When it came to talking to a financial aid staff member, Ironton was noticeably ahead of the other campuses, with a 60 percent very positive rating among attenders. Chillicothe received a rating of 42 percent, Lancaster 33 percent, Belmont 28 percent, and Zanesville 23 percent. In contrast, none of the campuses were especially successful in their media attempts, since newspaper, radio, and TV ads scored their highest at Ironton with 18 percent, followed by Lancaster at 15 percent, Zanesville at 13 percent, Belmont at 9 percent, and Chillicothe with no responses in this category.

The differences in the ratings of the recruiting activities among the campuses reflect the strengths and weaknesses of each campus. Programs that were evaluated as superior at some campuses can be studied, replicated, and transferred to other campuses that experienced lower ratings.

Rating the Recruitment Effort

Those students who were planning to enroll at a regional campus of Ohio University were asked to go back and rate the top three recruitment programs. The publications and letters sent out topped the list with a 23 percent rating followed by the campus visit at 19 percent. The visit by a campus counselor to the high school as well talking to the counselor at a function such as a college day both received a high ranking of 15 percent from the attenders.

Among the campuses, the publications and letters got the top rating except for Lancaster, which split between the visit of its admissions counselor to the high school and the talk with the admissions counselor at a function such as college day, both of which ranked first at the 18 percent level. In addition, the Ironton campus ranked publications and letters at the same 27 percent level as the campus visit.

Those Students Not Planning to Attend

We asked students to tell us what their plans were if they did not plan to attend one of the regional campuses. Most gave no response, but among those who did, 30 percent indicated they would be attending another college, 9 percent would be working, and 13 percent had miscellaneous plans.

Which institutions would they be attending? More than half gave no response and rest were spread among other colleges around

Ohio, with seven percent indicating they would be going to school outside of Ohio. Sixty-three percent did not give a reason for not attending, but 13 percent gave programs as their motivation. Both financial aid and wanting to be farther from home accounted for 9 percent, and 7 percent said they had moved.

We also wanted to know what colleges the nonattenders had applied to, and even though 33 percent gave no response, 13 percent said the main campus of Ohio University in Athens was their top choice, showing that the regional campuses serve as the backup school for some students. The second-ranked institution was Ohio State in Columbus, which was the first choice for 9 percent of the nonattenders. The highest-ranking private college was Muskingum College at 7 percent. Many students, however, indicated that the regional campus was their first choice, leading to a possible conclusion that the decision not to attend arose not from the competition but from personal reasons. At both Belmont and Ironton, all the nonattenders said they were admitted to the schools that were their first choices. Only at Chillicothe did the majority say they were not admitted to their first choice, even though slightly over half had not visited the school that had been their first choice.

Date of Final Decision

The month of May was when most students made their final decision to attend (14 percent), although June (11 percent) and

April (8 percent) rounded out the spring decision period. There was a significant number who waited until July (7 percent) to make up their minds to attend. Among the individual campuses, there was little variation from these dates, although Ironton students favored April and June over May while Lancaster students did not decide in April at a high rate (4 percent).

Future Implications

Branch campuses can have several missions as a part of a university system. These missions may include technical education, associate degrees, two-plus-two programs, baccalaureate degrees, graduate work, and continuing education. In addition, because of location the regional campuses might be a much closer part of their community than the parent campus. With all of these potential markets, it is critical that each branch be able to identify its environment and scan significant factors. Once these scans are done, it is important to translate these findings into program evaluations. Each location of a multicampus system must be viewed as unique, and market positions should be developed to maximize individual campuses.

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